

Gravdal, Kathryn. *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. Pp. x + 192. \$29.95, \$13.95.

Kathryn Gravdal's *Ravishing Maidens* has the transforming effect of an Escher print. What the audience saw once as blue figures on a red field becomes—suddenly and unmistakably—red figures on blue. With Gravdal's book, the many scenes of hetero-erotic seduction and play in medieval literature become a matter of rape. Her argument succeeds in changing the way we read the erotic; each time we encounter representations of men having their way with women—taking their pleasure as the Old French phrases it (*faire son plaisir*)—we now raise the question of sexual violence. In fact, so compelling is Gravdal's revisionist argument that it no longer seems possible to interpret medieval configurations of the erotic without seeing red—without also looking for the signs of rape.

Ravishing Maidens is situated squarely in a feminist, post-structuralist debate over the interpretative problem of rape. Gravdal brings to this debate the formative case of twelfth- and thirteenth-century French literature, exploring hagiography, satire, lyrics, and the most telling instance of romance. Across these various genres, Gravdal analyzes the rhetorical strategies used to naturalize the violent force directed against women. Often Old French texts dwell on the circumstances leading up to rape, thus making it appear inevitable and even appropriate. Often they desist from representing the act, a "veering off" that serves to heighten the audience's fascination with what is taboo. Whichever the case, Gravdal finds that the representations are focalized consistently through the male actors, with the position of women thereby elided. If women are figured at all, it is as the lucky beneficiaries of rape, "bouncing back pertly after the attack: unhurt, dry-eyed, cheerful, and refreshed" (110). The result, in Gravdal's view, is a progressive sentimentalization of physical aggression toward women under the guise of erotic pleasure—his *and* hers.

Gravdal aims her most trenchant analysis at the romance genre which "by definition must create the threat of rape" (43). According to its standard plot of "boy meets girl," women are presented as beautiful, ravishingly so. Yet as Gravdal shows, it is just that feminine identification with beauty that necessitates and justifies women being ravished. The pun in her title makes the point clear: the romance plot hinges on the inescapable logic of women's rape. Given the conventional portraits of attractive "woman" and physically assertive "man," it is fitting that women be overwhelmed forcefully. Gravdal pushes her analysis still further. By uncovering how sexual violence is integrated closely in the hetero-erotic plot, she reveals the contradiction in medieval definitions of the romantic. For this is also a genre that "teaches that rape is wrong" (67). The problem lies in the fact that works such as Chrétien de Troyes' *Chevalier de la Charrete* (*Knight of the Cart*) critique rape as the act of base men at the same time as they represent it in the alluring light of male fantasy. Gravdal brings these contradictory depictions to the fore so as to show that the tantalus of violent sex with women is never finally resolved—neither by foregrounding the violence nor by condemning it outright. It remains, in Gravdal's terms, the very stuff of romance.

Gravdal traces this tantalus into the realm of medieval legal theory and statutes. One

of her most original contributions involves studying the preoccupation of canon lawyers with rape. Not only does she survey the formulations of the most important treatise, Gratian's *Decretum*, but she introduces various French court records—a wealth of little-known accounts of rape. Drawing on the trenchwork of the historian James Brundage and the critical tenets of the “law and literature” movement, Gravdal broaches the legal register with an eye toward its own ambivalences about rape. However concerned canon lawyers were with the issue, under Gratian's influence, they diminished Justinian's earlier conception of a crime against an individual woman. They explored rape as an issue of men's property and honor. Correspondingly, they entertained the more lenient penalty of excommunication rather than death. This general relaxing of Roman standards was also borne out by Church practices where the penalties were rarely enforced. Turning to the civil domain, Gravdal finds further proof of the ambivalent legal attitudes toward rape. In the notorial transcriptions of actual trials, she uncovers tell-tale signs of a literary hand: witnesses and court scribes represent rape according to the models of romance and the lyric *pastourelle*. As she puts it succinctly, “medieval law patterns itself after medieval literature in the cultivation of textual practices that rationalize male violence against women” (20). Gravdal's argument comes full circle. Literary rape *conditions* the narration of real rape and its legal judgment.

Ravishing Maidens merits a wide audience because it transforms our understanding of representations that enmesh women and eros with sexual violence. So too Gravdal's *Signs* article where her argument is summarized for those unfamiliar with the European Middle Ages. Yet it is the very transforming effect of her research that leads me to the following questions. Gravdal works to make it impossible to read medieval representations of hetero-erotic love without first considering rape. Even with its own deliberate, violent twists, she presents her argument as “undeniable.” Not only does she privilege the critical act of seeing red, but she claims that seeing the misty blue of blissful couples—as critics did for generations—is out of the question. Such a view is hardly surprising given the pioneering scholarship on rape which Gravdal exploits and extends. However, it remains crucial to remember that all arguments involve a fundamental critical vision—hers as strongly as any other. If she is to make the representations of rape “self-evident,” she is challenged to prove the primacy of her vision in the most detailed and comprehensive manner. However compelling her vision, she must build a case for it.

In this report, Gravdal does not fully demonstrate what is an important and innovative thesis. She shows the tendency in several chapters of relying on simple assertion with little or no illustration. This is all the more disappointing given the richness of her material. For instance, in her discussion of the medieval terminology for rape (*esforcer, ravir*), Gravdal gives us precious few citations. She withholds examples that would let us follow the evolution of the sexual trope. In their place, we get her resume. Similarly, her review of legal debates over the criminality of rape glosses over some medieval texts. I was particularly frustrated when she mentions the legal question hotly debated: “when do arts and blandishment constitute illegal form of force in sexual seduction?” and gives us one scant reference and no discussion (120). What an opportunity missed! This is equally true of the rape trials Gravdal takes from a Parisian criminal register. The case of one Jacqueline la Cyrière accused of helping a soldier rape a young girl deserves a full exposition where Gravdal could have taken us through, point

for point. Her remarks hang on paraphrase. In a book that includes so much meticulous and salient commentary on narratives such as the *Roman de Renart*, there is no reason why Gravdal could not devote the same close attention to all her material. It is not that there is insufficient evidence for seeing the red of rape, as some curmudgeonly critics might have claimed a generation ago, but that the wealth of evidence is given short shrift.

This pattern of rushing through her most promising sources brings me to my second question, of a more theoretical nature. By studying representations of rape from legal texts together with those from lyric and romance, Gravdal dispenses with the aesthetic categories of literary and non-literary. True to her post-structuralist critical self, she investigates "the ways figures of discourse 'move'" (140). Nevertheless, her argument continues to be defined by the very categories she explicitly rejects. Her contention that legal accounts of women's rape are shaped by literary models keeps us firmly within the parameters of the oppositions: literary vs. documentary, fictive vs. real. To point out that literary representations of rape are no less "real" than events, or that documentary renditions of rape are shaped by fictive elements does not eliminate the oppositions. It merely turns them around.

One way out of these categories might involve studying the *social effects* of texts—how a spectrum of works about rape bears upon its various publics. Feminist critics like Gravdal could focus more on the influences that textual representation exert on women and men to act in a certain manner. What purchase do figures of rape have on their actions? Admittedly this is a vast and vexed inquiry, one that calls up the relation between texts and human behavior. Yet Gravdal hints at it herself. Referring frequently to the "consequences" of representing rape, she begins to reckon with the question. By recognizing the didactic potential of all texts, she suggests the need to explore how precisely such potential is realized. If we follow such a lead, Gravdal's work, I believe, will help us to advance the debate over the connections between the "sexy" depictions of women and the abuse they endure, between textual models and their social impact.

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Meale, Carol M., ed. *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993. Pp. 223.

The rather lackluster title of this collection of essays belies its contents, which offer a challenging and vital contribution to medieval feminist studies. Focusing broadly on "women and literature in Britain," the British contributors to this volume advance new perspectives on female literacy, patronage, book circulation and writing practices in the Middle Ages. In so doing, many of them also offer a productively unsettling view of literary study more generally and the terms in which it has been conventionally figured.

For example, Julia Boffey's essay on "Women Authors and Women's Literacy in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-century England" is less interested in locating female counterparts to the male author figure than in examining "the different senses in which 'writing women' might have existed in the period." The questions that guide Boffey's analysis suggest the extent to which examining the "writing woman" brings together